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Swiss foreign policy is looking for a new figurehead

Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey is stepping down at the end of the year after nine years. Her departure is adding to the anticipation ahead of the Federal Council elections on 14 December.

By René Lenzin

“The unyielding patriot” – “Her ambition was greater than the nation” – “Between escapades and commitment” – “The achievements of an iridescent sphinx” – “Micheline Calmy-Rey, an unconventional figure” – “Cruella, the Swiss queen of Brussels”. These are just some of the headlines used by the Swiss media to report Micheline Calmy-Rey’s decision to stand down. They show that the Geneva politician born in Valais is a colourful yet controversial figure. She will remain in charge of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), which she took over after her election to the Federal Council, until the end of the year.

Social Democrat Calmy-Rey was elected as the successor to Ruth Dreifuss by the Federal Assembly in December 2002. She then had to take over the FDFA against her wishes. Nevertheless, she made every effort to raise Switzerland’s and her own profile internationally and to give Swiss foreign politics a new image. With the concept of “active neutrality” she attempted to give a new dimension to a traditional value popular with the majority of Swiss people. Her goal was an “active foreign policy focusing on the promotion of peace, international law, human rights and the fight against poverty”, as she put it herself. Her greatest achievements, she says, include the UN Human Rights Council, which Switzerland played a major role in establishing, and mediation in the conflicts between Russia and Georgia and between Turkey and Armenia.

Ambiguous position on the EU

In Brussels, Calmy-Rey was a dedicated representative of Swiss interests vis-à-vis the European Union. Despite her repeated pledges of commitment to the bilateral route, her position on possible EU acces-

sion has ultimately remained ambiguous. Her opponents in Parliament reproach her for secretly pursuing a policy of rapprochement that would inevitably end in accession. They also level criticism at her often ill-considered activism in the world that does Switzerland more harm than good. In contrast, Calmy-Rey’s supporters praise her pragmatic approach to policy on Europe. They say she also recognised that Switzerland could only pursue and protect its interests through a greater international presence.

The Swiss abroad also see Calmy-Rey as a controversial figure. In order to implement her foreign policy priorities while at the same time meeting restrictive financial targets, she reorganised the diplomatic and

consular service, resulting in a reduction in services, particularly in Europe, and even the closure of some consulates (see also page 27). The FDFA under Micheline Calmy-Rey also cut the budget for “Swiss Review”.

The Foreign Minister has twice served as President of the Confederation, in 2007 and again this year. Her charm is well-received at public engagements. She has a good relationship with the people and was one of the most popular members of national government until recently. Immediately after taking up office, she won public approval by positioning herself as an opponent of the Iraq war. However, her reputation suffered during the Swiss hostage situation in Libya, though the entire national government and particularly the then President, Hans-Rudolf Merz, emerged from this with a tarnished image. Internally, Calmy-Rey is regarded as a demanding and capricious head who expects absolute loyalty from her staff. “That’s what I want!” is a turn of phrase she is said to often use. At the start of her term of office, in particular, there was a high turnover in her inner circles.

First grandmother on the Federal Council

Micheline Calmy-Rey grew up in Valais but studied for her degree and started her political career in Geneva. After several years on the Great Council, the Geneva electorate voted her into the cantonal government in 1997, where she was in charge of the finance department until her election to the Federal Council.

The promotion of women is a key issue for Calmy-Rey both inside and outside her department. The mother-of-two was the first grandmother on the Federal Council. At the age of 66, she will now find more time to devote to her three grandchildren. She is also said to harbour ambitions of a role with an international organisation. Parliament must first decide on her successor – the favourites for the post are all men. Her retirement has created added anticipation ahead of the complete re-election of the Federal Council on 14 December.

